

THE ASIANADIAN

AN ASIAN CANADIAN MAGAZINE

SUGUNASIRI

South Asian Canadian
Literature

RAYMOND MORIYAMA

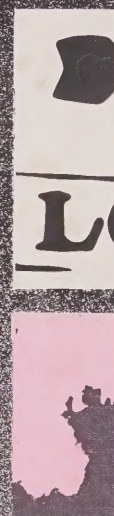
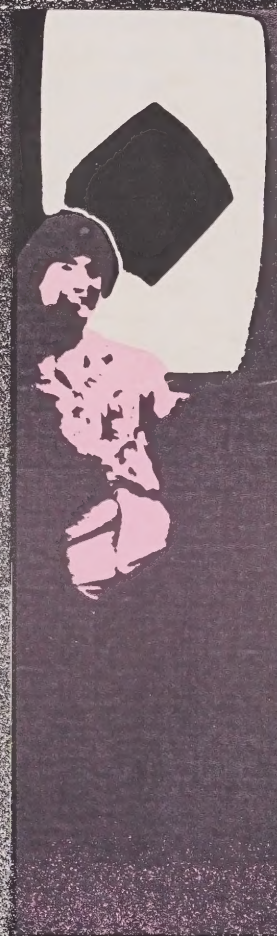
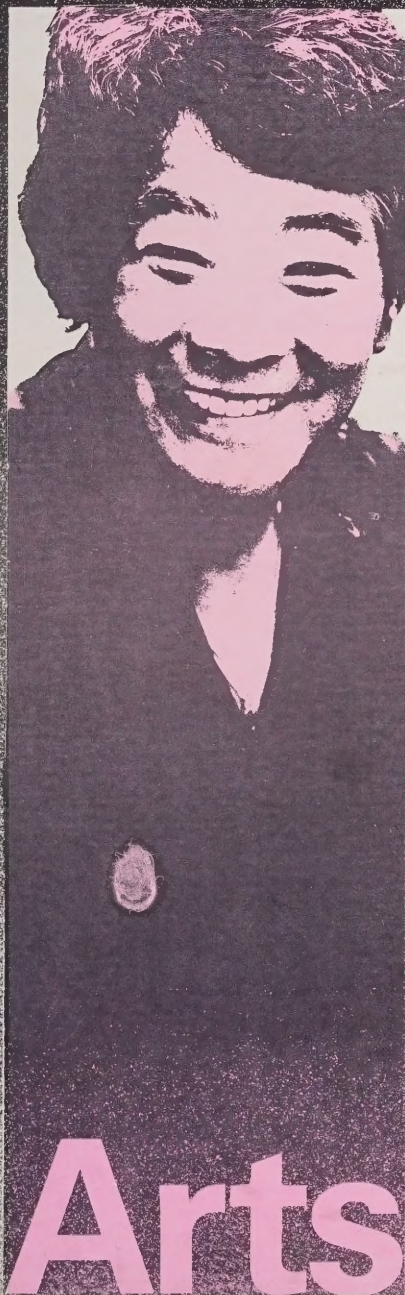
Beyond Architecture

RICK SHIOMI

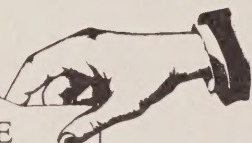
Playwriting

TERRY WATADA

Music



AN INVITATION



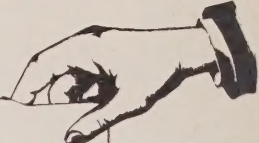
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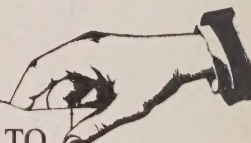


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VOL. 5 NO. 3

FEB/WINTER 1984

\$1.75

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EDITORIAL

Being a creative person of Asian origin in North America has been considered a handicap. So few people seem to be interested in what Asian artists have to say. Even members of Asian communities do not take an ordinary interest in the outpouring of their artists.

To many Asians (particularly first generation immigrants) culture is the active practice of nostalgia — a way of emotionally keeping in touch with the homeland. So they throng to see artists from home on short tours here.

No doubt witnessing expressions of homeland culture gives a sense of continuity to people surrounded by a culture they do not fully feel a part of. The mainstream art in North America has so little to say about the lived experience of Asians on this continent.

But there is another art emerging in North America. It is slowly germinating in the pores of the cultural landscape. Only a few of the sprouts have as yet been recognized by the community at large.

The new art is Asian North American art. It is an art striving to give form and expression to the Asian experience in North America.

This issue of the Asianadian looks at this art and discusses the works of some of the artists.

Perhaps the one who expresses the Asian North American predicament best is playwright Rick Shiomi. One senses, in reading the interview with him, that he has no doubts about himself and what he wants to be. For years, he says, he searched for his creative "territory." He found it when he went back to his Asian Canadian roots.

Song writer and singer Terry Watada has been attempting to explore the same theme in his lyrics. While his music is North American, the emotions and experiences it embodies are that of Asians on this continent.

Sugunasiri, in his article, presents us with a review of South Asian Canadian literature. A rich, fertile world. And yet how many people have heard about this literature? While some of the writing is about the homeland, increasingly life in Canada seems to be taking over and becoming the focus of interest.

Architect Raymond Moriyama, on the other hand, does not fit into the general mould of Asian Canadian artists. His message is universal. He attempts to address the spiritual needs of man. But, even for him, his Asian Canadian background is an important part of his inspiration.

If there is any common theme in the articles contained in this issue, it is this: an authentic Asian North American art is struggling to find its place in the sun. It is up to Asian communities to nurture this art and these artists. For these artists serve the cultural needs of Asians on this continent more directly than touring artists from the homeland.

And besides, being rooted in this continent this art must, in time, reach the mainstream society. When it does, it will broaden and deepen North American society's understanding of the modern world. Because of the duality of their cultural background Asian North American artists have a unique perspective on the emerging peoples of the world — peoples who will surely dominate the future.

So a North American artist's Asian background is not really a handicap. It is a great opportunity.

RAYMOND MORIYAMA

BEYOND ARCHITECTURE

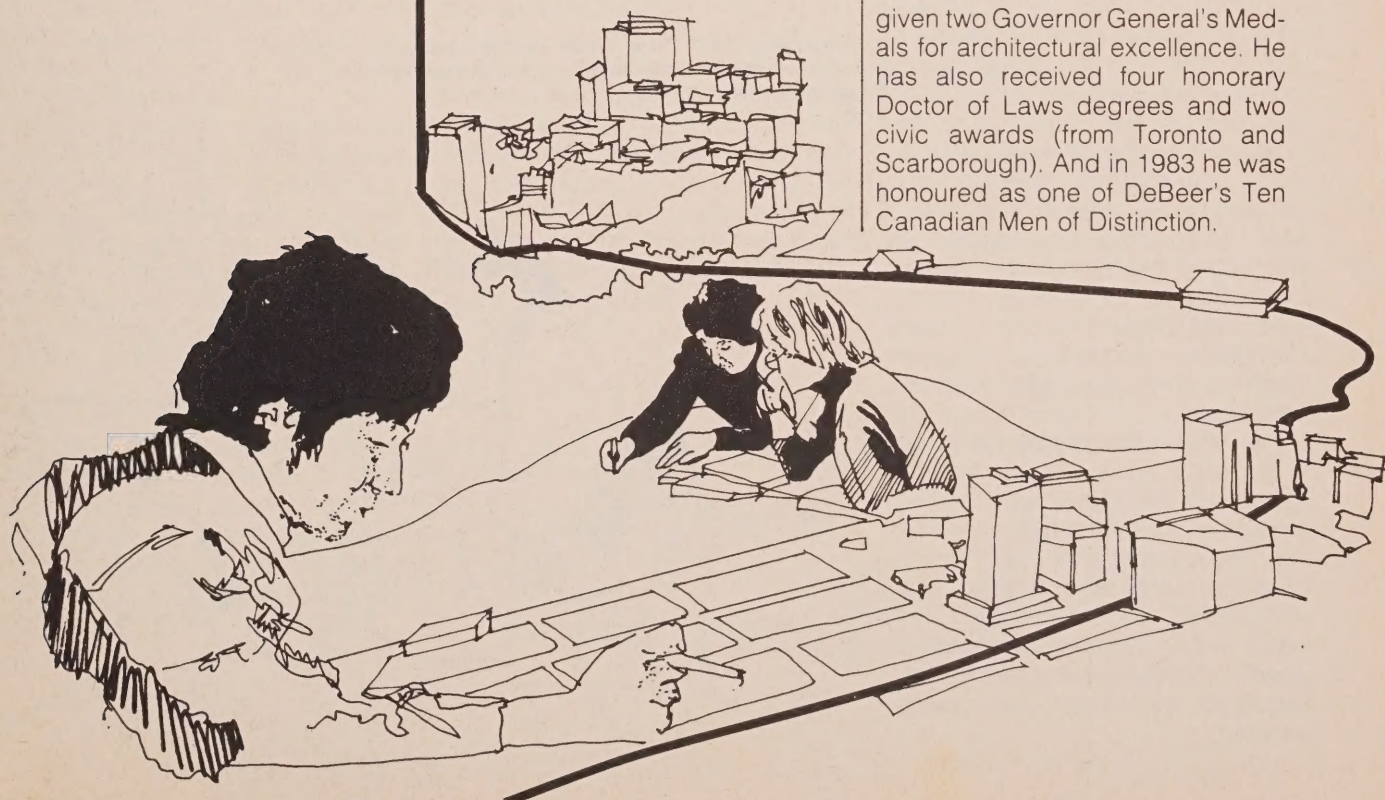
by
satish
dhar

"Architecture is for me
a tool...
to foster inner
growth..."

Moriyama's architectural style has a certain dramatic, almost seductive power which turns people on. Two of his buildings, the Ontario Science Centre (1969) and the Scarborough Civic Centre (1973), have become major tourist attractions in the Toronto area. People flock to these centres not just for the activities they contain but also for the architectural statements they embody. How many architects can claim as much for their work?

And yet critical acclaim for Moriyama's architecture has been slow in coming. In fact both these buildings were panned by architectural critics when they opened. The Science Centre was declared "a jumble of arbitrary forms" which had "crucified" a lovely ravine site. The Scarborough Civic Centre was labelled as being "grandiose ... too strong on uplift" and "without a modest concern for our daily lives."

Moriyama is not without professional honours, however. In his quarter century as a practising architect he has received more than 30 Canadian and international awards for his work. In 1982 he was given two Governor General's Medals for architectural excellence. He has also received four honorary Doctor of Laws degrees and two civic awards (from Toronto and Scarborough). And in 1983 he was honoured as one of DeBeer's Ten Canadian Men of Distinction.



And so one can readily understand Moriyama scoffing at his architectural critics. "If I'm blunt about it," he says, his voice rising only slightly, "I think they are full of B.S. Because they are looking at my work superficially – as architects. My context is not architecture. Architecture for me is a tool.... My criterion for judging all my architectural work is: how does it foster lasting human satisfaction, and in particular the inner growth and personal fulfillment of its users."

When I went to meet Moriyama in his Toronto office I did not know what to expect. I could not reconcile the bold forms of his buildings with the earnest, almost sententious tone of some of his writings. The man who greeted me was surprisingly boyish looking for his fifty four years. He had about him an air of tranquility and repose, even a hint of poignancy as if the ways of the world could no longer disturb his inner calm. He answered my questions slowly, pondering over his thoughts as he expressed them.

I asked Moriyama when he first thought of becoming an architect.

"At the age of four," he replied without hesitation. "I was laid up in bed at that age for almost eight months recovering from a near fatal burn." He recalled that to take his mind off the pain he would spend hours imaginatively transforming his play-world prior to the accident – a rock on a construction site across from his Vancouver home – into a fairy land of castles, mountains and dream houses. These exhilarating moments of escape created in him the desire to be an architect.

The other clear memory he has of his early years was his visit to Japan with his mother and sister at the age of five-and-a-half. There he met his grandfather, a mining executive, and also a poet and philosopher who wrote *haiku*. He had a moon-gazing platform and a pond in his backyard where young Raymond spent many memorable evenings.

Ever since he was four Moriyama wanted to be an architect



Grandfather said "The moon shines just as much on the handful of water, as on a pond, the lake over there and the ocean."



Meena Dhar

After Pearl Harbour things started to turn ugly. Canadians of Japanese origin could be shot on sight.

On one of these evenings Grandfather asked Raymond to scoop up some water from the pond. The young child dutifully brought up a tiny pool of quivering moon-filled water which blinked and winked in his cupped hands. Grandfather pointing first at young Raymond's hands, then at the pond and finally at the darkness beyond said, "The moon shines just as much on the handful of water as on a pond, that lake over there and the ocean."

The Moriyama family returned home to Vancouver in 1936 when young Raymond was six-and-a-half. Home was behind father's hardware store on Cordova Street near Main in an area called Jap-town. Father had immigrated to Canada in 1923 and Mother in 1928 after getting married to Moriyama senior on his one trip home. Raymond was born a year later.

Moriyama remembers his childhood as being uneventful until Pearl Harbour when things started to turn really ugly. Canadians of Japanese origin could be shot on sight if found on the streets after dark. Then came the infamous proclamation directing every able bodied man of Japanese ancestry to report to a designated road camp in the interior of British Columbia.

On the night of the proclamation the older Moriyama took twelve year old Raymond aside: "I came to Canada," his father said, "for the same reason that Canada is going to war – the rights of the individual and democracy. And now I am facing a contradiction. I am being forcibly separated from my family and sent away."

When the time came to report the elder Moriyama refused to go to camp. He decided to resist. "I have always respected my dad for that," says Moriyama. "For standing up and resisting. He is such a mild person and it must have taken a lot of courage."

Within a couple of days came the dreaded knock on the door and two jackbooted mounties took Raymond's father away. He was sent to a prisoner of war camp in Petawawa and later transferred to Angler, Ontario.

Twelve year old Raymond had to leave school in grade five and look after the hardware store. Suddenly the creditors and suppliers became vicious, almost savage in their demands. The business had to be auctioned off. But even the pittance they made at the auction was confiscated by the government. Nobody knows where the money went, says Moriyama.

In January 1942, their livelihood and home gone, young Raymond, his two younger sisters and mother were sent to the Pacific National Exhibition grounds in Vancouver prior to being relocated in an internment camp in the interior of British Columbia. At the P.N.E. grounds they were dumped in a horse-stall, with two double-tiered bunks and four straw mattresses.

Moriyama remembers the scene as if it took place yesterday: "I don't know what happened but all of a sudden our eyes went to the corner of the horse-stall. And we saw bed bugs crawling all over. And we looked at that and we looked at each other and I bet we must have cried for two hours. Life had got to such a basic level."

The Moriyamas were put up in the P.N.E. horse-stall for a few months before being sent to Slocan, B.C., where they had to live in a tent in temperatures of minus forty degrees. The next two years were a sort of diaspora – they were shunted from ghost town to ghost town – Rink, Lemon Creek, Popof, Bayfarm. They lived in primitive, un-insulated shacks without indoor plumbing. In winter water had to be made by melting ice from nearby ponds. Young Raymond hauled water, dug ditches, cut trees, worked in a saw-mill and as a carpenter's apprentice earning from 5¢ to 7½¢ an hour. These earnings and \$32 a month government dole kept the family going.

But even during these desolate years, Raymond's awareness was alive to transforming experiences. He remembers one particularly. It happened during a hiking trip in the mountains. While trying to dislodge a friend from a ledge he lost his footing and fell 60 feet below. He was not hurt. A forty foot dead evergreen tree had broken his fall. As he looked up at the dead evergreen tree, he had this sudden realization: he needed the tree, the tree didn't need him! Moriyama remembers that his thinking about their predicament began to change after this experience: "My troubles now seemed so miniscule compared to the timeless and transcendent power of nature. I was convinced that nature would win out in the end and restore the balance. This belief was a great solace to me during my internment years".



In 1944 the authorities released the older Moriyama from the POW camp at Angler, Ontario and the family was reunited in Hamilton. The first few years were hard on the Moriyamas. They were one of the first Japanese Canadian families in the city. Father worked in construction where he received a fraction of white worker's wages and had to supplement his income washing dishes at night. Mother worked as a cleaning lady. Moriyama recalls: "There was tremendous discrimination during the early years. White families were warned against employing even Japanese women for fear they would be stabbed in the back. Many people thought of all Japanese as short, buck-toothed, bespectacled and treacherous."

In spite of missing several years of school work Moriyama did well in school. But he really came to his own at the School of Architecture, University of Toronto which he joined in 1949. For Moriyama university years seem to have been a blessed time, when he experienced for the first time what he cherishes most: personal growth in an atmosphere of challenge and freedom. He graduated in 1954 after winning his first architectural competition. Soon after graduation he got married, then earned his M.Arch. degree at McGill University in Montreal on a part time basis while supporting his growing family.

Moriyama finished his studies in 1957. In 1958 he started his own practice in Toronto. He recalls one of his old architecture school professors advising him against such a rash move: he was too young, there was a recession on and he was Japanese Canadian. "They'll eat you alive," Moriyama remembers his professor warning him.

The professor was proven wrong, of course. Moriyama's great faith in himself and in his mission as an architect would not allow anything but success. Slowly prestigious commissions came his way, beginning with the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre, completed in 1963. In 1966 he purchased an old service station in Downtown Toronto and transformed it into his architectural office. In 1970 Ted Teshima, a member of the firm, joined him as a partner. By the middle 1970s Moriyama had become one of the best known architects in Canada.

It had been a long journey from an obscure childhood in Vancouver's Japtown, through the shame of the internment years, to fame as an architect. I wanted to understand how Moriyama had been able to pursue his goal so single mindedly, considering his childhood experiences. So I asked him: did he at any time have doubts about himself, about his being a worthy person – particularly when the anti-Japanese campaign was at its height?

"Never about becoming an architect," averred Moriyama. "As a person, yes. But what gave me confidence was that I had a fantastic heritage. I remember my grandfather telling me: 'Junichi (he always called me by my Japanese name) don't ever forget you are the son of a *Samurai*. For a *Samurai* life is a mission of service.'"

As Moriyama talked, I pictured him during his internment years trying to fill the cold emptiness inside him by reliving his special memories: the warmth of family gatherings in Vancouver, his visit to Japan, the evenings with his grandfather on the moon-gazing platform. I pictured him dreaming his dream to be an architect. Then I thought of other Japanese Canadians going through the internment years without a dream to sustain them, their lives untouched by faith in their heritage, unsure of themselves. How did *their* egos survive? Or did they?

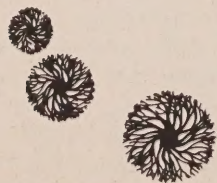
Perhaps these thoughts were coursing through Moriyama's mind as well. For he said at this point: "Many of my non-Japanese Canadian friends often express the opinion that the forced dispersal benefited the Japanese community ('Look how well you are all doing now,' they say). I tell them: 'That's questionable, that's hypothetical.'"

Questionable indeed! I couldn't help thinking. How many Japanese Canadians, unable to cope with being so totally rejected by their own countrymen, grew limp inside and took any shape that would render them unobtrusive? How many blamed their 'Japaneseness' for their fate? And how many, to forget their humiliation, tried to erase their 'Japaneseness'? How many succeeded? And at what cost?

"Even many Japanese Canadians," says Moriyama, "rationalize that their forced dispersal was good for them. It's a form of psychological self protection. Believing that allows you to sweep your bitterness under the carpet, otherwise you feel you may become cynical. Some don't even want to raise the whole issue of reparations to Japanese Canadians."

Again and again our conversation turned to the subject of Moriyama's internment experience. I found myself fascinated by it, repeatedly asking about it. And as I listened to Moriyama, I began to sense how close to the centre of his being the wound still is. The pain of it is not just a memory, it is like a sixth sense, a way of experiencing the world.

With that insight glimmering in my mind, I realized that I had to look at Moriyama's writings and architecture with fresh eyes. Many of his pronouncements which earlier had struck me as high sounding but insubstantial now acquired a new resonance.



**"They'll eat you alive,"
Moriyama remembers
his old professor warning him.**

One of Moriyama's central concerns, expressed in his writings and speeches, is the fragility of democracy and the responsibility of each of us to preserve freedom. He feels we must do whatever we can to ensure that the Japanese Canadian experience is not repeated. Moriyama was appalled by the first peace-time invocation of the War Measures Act in 1970 and the wild jingoistic support it got in many quarters in the country. "We have not learnt anything yet," he says shaking his head in disbelief.

Moriyama has given architectural form to his concern for democracy in his design for the Scarborough Civic Centre. Basic to his design is a Central Space – a sort of interior town square for public gatherings. This space goes right through the heart of the building like an atrium and the various municipal offices radiate from it in tiers. The offices are open areas, uninterrupted by

walls and enclosures. This arrangement is designed to give the impression of an approachable, accessible government and to allow for face-to-face contact between the municipal officials and the citizens.

One architectural writer has criticized Moriyama for not being sufficiently sensitive to the more mundane needs of both the visitors and those working in the offices ('without a modest concern for our daily lives'). He is implying among other things that the open landscape office environment is not the most suitable for people. It is an irony, according to this critic, that the Council Chamber has such a secret crypt-like quality, particularly when one of the intentions of the building design is to render the workings of government transparent to the public.

It seems to me that in his design of the Scarborough Civic Centre Moriyama tellingly expresses his anxiety about institutional democracy. After all was it not institutional democracy that robbed the Japanese Canadians of their rights? Moriyama seems to be saying that the only hope for preserving freedom, everyone's freedom not just the majority's, is for the public rather than the institutions to take the centre stage. Moriyama's greatest fear is that without public involvement our institutions may thwart growth – particularly spiritual growth. He is, therefore, prepared to sacrifice some efficiency to promote human interaction.

Snow flake on rock: the Sudbury Science Centre is a metaphor for man in geological time.



According to Moriyama, spiritual growth requires not only free but participating individuals who have opened themselves to experience. Like a Zen Buddhist he believes that direct personal experience is the foundation of human understanding and wisdom. In fact knowledge unbaptized by experience, untouched by feeling or intuition is barren. It leads to an exercise of power untempered by moral judgement. Was not the arbitrary incarceration of Japanese Canadians an exercise of such power?

These views on the importance of experience in human understanding are the inspiration behind Moriyama's concept of the Ontario Science Centre. He conceived the Science Centre as a place where people can experience science at work — visitors can become participants, conducting experiments and using scientific equipment. This is now what is called a 'hands on' museum. Originally some museumologists decried the Science Centre (Coney Island, they called it). But the 'hands on' idea has since caught on the world over and is now a Canadian export.

The architecture of the Science Centre is designed to enhance the receptivity of the visitors to the experience of science. A low-key entrance hall greets the public — a sort of extension of daily life with its coat-checking facilities, restaurants and gift shops. After that the visitors unexpectedly find themselves on a bridge suspended over a ravine — an experience that lulls their perceptions and momentarily breaks the subjective continuity of their everyday existence. In this way they are mentally prepared for the world of science which unfolds in the exhibit halls at mid-level. Once that experience is over, visitors enjoy another mental pause as they are taken by an escalator down to the valley floor where the main scientific activities take place.

In the Scarborough Civic Centre, Moriyama gives the centre stage to the public rather than to City Council thereby expressing his anxiety about institutional democracy.

Like a Zen Buddhist, Moriyama believes that direct personal experience is the foundation of human understanding and wisdom.

When Moriyama talks about experience he does not just mean the slow oozing of the external world into one's consciousness. For him the highest level of experience is spiritual experience and seems much like the Zen *Satori*: "the sudden illumination which unveils the primordial harmony of things".

Many of Moriyama's seminal design ideas seem to burst upon him during these 'Satorical' moments of illumination. For example, the answer to the conceptual form of the Scarborough Civic Centre came to him on a flight over Finland. He remembers the feeling well, "there was a literal click in my consciousness, it was a momentary elation and culmination of having lived with the project for many months."

In the case of the Sudbury Science Centre (presently under construction) "the magical moment happened", according to Moriyama, "on a clear day early in June on top of the blackened, bare hill adjacent to the abandoned Murray Mine, viewing and being awed by the immensity and beauty of the Sudbury Basin... My heart wanted to burst out singing. My lips wanted to shout 'Eureka!'".

Moments of spiritual elevation have occurred throughout Moriyama's life — even as a child. His decision to become an architect seems to have been the result of such an experience — otherwise how can Moriyama be so uncannily precise about the time of his decision? The revelation about nature that he received after his fall from a mountain ledge during his internment years also fits into this pattern.

While designing the Sudbury Science Centre, Moriyama's consciousness seems to have been stirred by a vision of the cataclysmic event which formed the crater called the Sudbury Basin and by a sudden realization of the age of the Basin (2.0 billion years — about half the age of the earth). To communicate this flash of insight, Moriyama selected as the site for the Science Centre an exposed basaltic rock outcrop near the Sudbury waterfront. He created in this protruding rock formation an open pit mine and tunnel. He then placed the main structure of the Centre on the mine and used the rock-faced tunnel to connect it to a separate entrance structure. He designed the upper part of the main structure in the shape of a hexagonal snow crystal.



Moriyama is one of those cultural pioneers who are synthesizing a new consciousness.

By this unexpected juxtaposition of rock, massive and everlasting, with a snowflake, tiny and evanescent, Moriyama hopes to pierce the minds of visitors with a glimpse of themselves in geological time: mere flickers in eternity. Such a realization may help people momentarily transcend their every day anxieties, much as it helped young Moriyama during his incarceration years.

Moriyama's concept of nature is a refraction of his experiences during childhood in the B.C. interior coloured by Japanese philosophy. Like Zen Buddhists, Moriyama believes that natural reality is the all encompassing one, not human reality — humanity, in fact, is a part of nature. Also that the essence of nature is to be found in its phenomenal aspect: that process, change and evolution are basic to nature.

These views are opposed to traditional western thought which holds that nature is one of God's bounties for man's domination and that in its essence nature is pure, static perfection. It is from his singular perception of nature that Moriyama arrives at his contrary, almost quixotic belief that man's evolution must be made to coincide with that of nature and that man must not manipulate natural evolution to his own ends.

Moriyama is impressed by the scale of the Canadian landscape. This is in contrast to the preoccupation of the Japanese for simple,

compact harmonies expressed in Japanese gardens — nature in miniature. Recently it is the temporal scale in nature that seems to have taken hold of Moriyama's imagination. He is fascinated by the residues and imprints that the passage of aeons and epochs has left on earth and on man. It is this aspect of nature that he celebrates in the design of the Sudbury Science Centre.

Given his breadth of vision, what does Moriyama consider to be the basic objective of architecture?

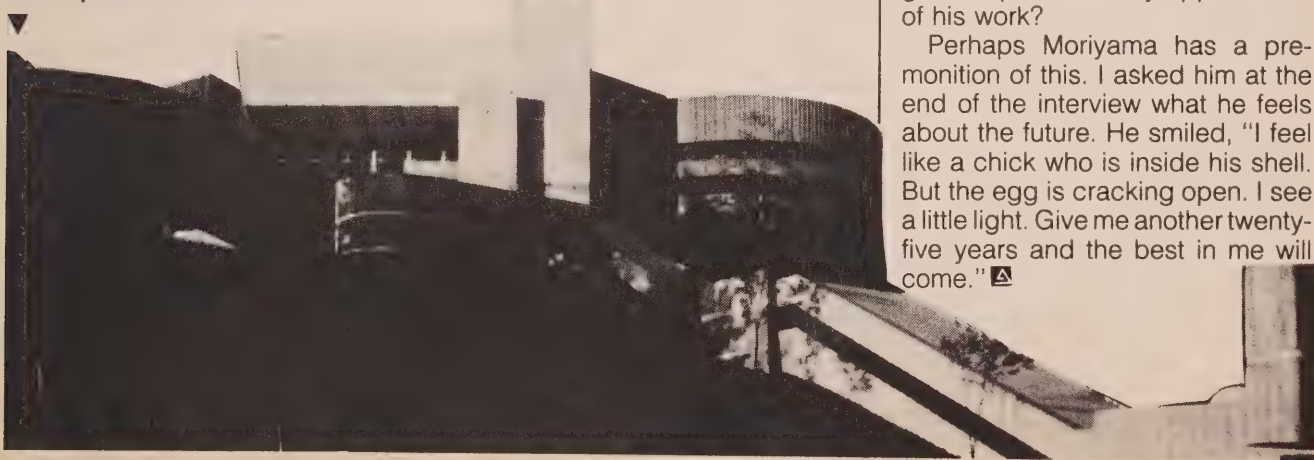
"I have always considered," Moriyama responds, "that the ultimate purpose of architecture is to go beyond securing the basic needs, to allow spiritual needs to emerge. Architecture should be a foil or background, the enabling device." In other words, architecture should take the individual's mind beyond architecture. Moriyama has attempted to do this by making his architecture speak about some aspect of the human condition: the meaning of democracy (Scarborough Civic Centre); experience as a basis for understanding science and technology (Ontario Science Centre); apprehension of geological time and man's place in it (Sudbury Science Centre). His architectural statements are like homilies: simple, to some architects even simple-minded, but they are in a language people seem to understand.

Architecturally and philosophically Moriyama considers himself, as he puts it, "a paradox and a complementarity". Perhaps he feels he is a paradox because in a highly technological profession he believes in intuition and even mystical experiences; because he is a man of great inner tranquility but produces a forceful and dramatic style of architecture; because he combines a Zen Buddhist concept of nature with an almost geological appreciation of the earth's history; because temperamentally he is an eastern contemplative artist operating successfully in a highly competitive western context.

But one is then tempted to ask: how do people decide what is a paradox and what is a complementarity? Is not the notion of order and wholeness (the flip-side of a paradox) deeply embedded in the ideology of a culture? Perhaps Moriyama is measuring himself by some fading concept of order derived from traditional western notions. That, in fact, by living his life true to his beliefs and experiences, by being alive to his heritage, Moriyama is one of those cultural pioneers who are synthesizing a new consciousness — a consciousness which fairly crackles with insights about emerging society and its spiritual needs. Is that the reason why, while some architects criticize Moriyama for being 'banal' and 'grandiose', the general public is very appreciative of his work?

Perhaps Moriyama has a premonition of this. I asked him at the end of the interview what he feels about the future. He smiled, "I feel like a chick who is inside his shell. But the egg is cracking open. I see a little light. Give me another twenty-five years and the best in me will come." 

Escalator shafts leading to the ravine floor at the Ontario Science Centre: a mental pause for visitors.



FACE TO FACE

with **RICK SHIOMI**



Rick Shiomi is the best known Asian Canadian playwright. His play "Yellow Fever" has been performed in several North American cities. It won five awards at the 1984 Ontario Multicultural Theatre Festival held in Toronto.

Mina Wong and Satish Dhar interviewed him recently in Toronto.

ASIANADIAN: *Can you give us the background on how you came to write your play Yellow Fever and how it came to be produced?*

RICK SHIOMI: Well, first of all, I met this man in Vancouver, a Nisei who reminded me of Columbo, the detective in the TV series. I decided to do a detective story using this man as a character. I had written one or two short stories before with moderate success. It was very difficult for me. But I did want to be a writer. And it wasn't working out. This one story seemed to come very easily. It was very zany, kind of slapstick, kind of crazy.

A friend of mine Philip Gotanda, who is a playwright read the short story and asked me if I was interested in turning it into a play. I'd never thought of seriously writing plays. There was no theatre group in Vancouver, virtually no Asian theatre group in Canada.

But based on Philip Gotanda's advice I went down to San Francisco and submitted my story to the Asian America Theatre Group and told them I was interested in adapting it into a play. They said sure. I got a director Mark Hayashi (and later Blaine Ishikawa) to help me reshape the whole idea so that it would fit into this new medium.

We ran the play in March 1982 in San Francisco. We got good reviews from the mainstream press. This brought a lot of mainstream theatre-goers. Suddenly it was a 50-50 clientele: half mainstream audience and half our own. Soon we were selling out 10 nights in a row.

So after that we sent the script to various theatre companies. The Pan-Asian Theatre Company in New York wanted to do it. And it was this company's performance of it in New York that broke the story wide open. As soon as we got good

reviews in New York everybody in North America got to know about *Yellow Fever*. We got calls from San Francisco and Vancouver. In Vancouver they were asking who is this guy? They'd never heard of me in Vancouver, since I had never worked or produced anything in Vancouver.

Anyhow the play did well in New York during the first run and we ran it off-Broadway for two runs, ending in June 1983.

A: *How would you characterize Yellow Fever?*

R.S.: To my mind *Yellow Fever* is a good off-off-Broadway play. As an off-Broadway play it's so-so. An off-Broadway audience is middle or upper middle class because of the price of the tickets. Apart from the liberal fringes of this class, the middle-of-the-roads are not interested in seeing Asian characters, unless there is a prominent Asian-American involved.

I am a relatively unknown playwright. This is my first play. Sam Sheppard, for instance, would draw an audience on the strength of his name.

So there are all these factors which influence whether you are going to succeed or not. And so much of what is considered good art is measured in terms of success. You may have an excellent piece of art or writing and yet it may be very difficult to get it produced.

And if you do manage to get it produced, it is very difficult to get people to come and to appreciate it. It's a very tricky thing.

One of the basic premises of North American society is that it is white. We are called non-white and carry a negative image. Our challenge is to break that.

A: *What happened during Yellow Fever's Toronto run?*

R.A.: We ran it in Toronto supposedly for eight weeks. And by what people tell me most reviews were good (one or two were murderous like *Maclean's* magazine). *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail* gave decent reviews. I would have expected it to run to seven or eight weeks. What started to happen was that after four or five weeks it started to drop off quite considerably.

I still think that it didn't do that well in Toronto. This in spite of the fact that it's Canadian, the first major Asian-Canadian production that's done well and was recognized south of the border (which is important to Canadians even though they hate admitting it). I don't think Canadians wanted to hear what we had to say.

A: *What about the response of Asian-Canadian community in Toronto to Yellow Fever?*

R.S.: I think they have been generally supportive both in Canada and the United States. In Toronto the audience was 30% to 40% Asians compared to about 50% in the U.S. I think Asian-Canadians are not accustomed to going to theatre yet. It's a new phenomenon here. In the U.S. they've had an Asian-American theatre for 5 to 10 years.

A: *Can we talk about your development as a Japanese-Canadian writer? Originally what got you interested in becoming a writer?*

R.S.: Even though I had always wanted to write, I never really wrote until my late twenties. By then I had begun to get involved in community activities and I found something to write about that was uniquely mine.

I should go back into my earlier years to explain that. It wasn't till I got to high school that I became aware of what it was like to be Japanese – the social handicaps of being a minority. I made friends with a Japanese-Canadian to find out who I was. But I really lived in two different worlds: my home which was traditional Japanese and my friends who were almost all Caucasian.

Well, when I went to Victoria College at the University of Toronto, I began to realize that this trend was insane. So I travelled to Vancouver to look for something more meaningful. After completing Teacher's College there I travelled to the Far East: Japan and Hong Kong – and taught school in Hong Kong. It was in Japan and Hong Kong I felt this tension released – this tension of being a visible minority. But another tension developed. There were language and cultural differences that I couldn't get used to. I felt, for instance, some of the values in these countries were too strict.

When I returned to Canada I began to feel I had to find out more about myself. So I got involved in the Japanese community in Vancouver and I found the identity that I had been trying to understand. I found my territory.

At first I wrote letters a lot – this lasted about eight years. For me – this became a form of writing. Half the time I bet my friends just collected my letters but couldn't understand what I was writing.

The eighties are going to be for the Asians in North America; it is our decade



Childhood photograph of Rick Shiomi. Rick is at the extreme right

The first structural piece I wrote was a short story about a relationship I had with a woman tourist from Japan while I was in Vancouver. The story was about my attitudes towards the relationship as a Sansei and hers as a Japanese. From that I went to writing some more short stories and then *Yellow Fever*.

The major theme in my writing is, and will continue to be, the Asian-North American experience. It is what I know best, what I have lived, understand, studied and want to write about. And that's still a gold mine, a treasure house of so many experiences. The historical themes have been developed but there's an enormous storehouse of contemporary themes which has not been touched yet.

A: What do you think of Asian-Canadian artists who avoid expressing their Asian identity?

R.S.: I wouldn't want to pass judgement. I think it's really easy to do that if you don't want to think about questions relating to your identity or the realities of your position in our society. I did that for a long time.

For my own part I think it's a great advantage to having a dual identity – to be a member of an ethnic

community as well as the larger society. I think the hybrid force is a terrific thing. I can't see myself trying to become traditionally Japanese or going back to Japan. I have been there and realized that that's not what I want to be.

But then I don't identify with trying to be white, a part of mainstream society. I am in this particular stream of our society that I think is really exciting and is going to have an impact on the larger society. I believe the impact is coming.

A: What do you think is the future of the Japanese Canadian community? Do you think it will be totally assimilated?

R.S.: Two generations down the road, the elements of being Japanese will still be maintained. For Japanese Canadians the process of assimilation has not been easy and still isn't easy. To my mind it's our visibility. It's very much a question of how the mainstream society sees you that affects how you see yourself. Some of us see ourselves as 'Asian' or 'Oriental' because society lumps us all in one group. As a result of this many of us, particularly in the third generation, have made a deliberate attempt to work together. For instance, in the past relations between Japanese-Canadians and Chinese-Canadians have been hostile and competitive. But I and my Chinese-Canadian friends have consciously crossed traditional boundaries and bridged the gap.

You see we have a common history of deprivation and now we are changing that and turning the tables. Given the political reality, we are dealing with the problem not as individuals, not as separate groups, but as one coherent group. We are seeking a just and fair participation in our society.

A: *Do you think that is the biggest issue for Asian Canadians?*

R.S.: Yes. One of the basic premise of North American society is that it is white. We are called non-white and carry a negative image. Our challenge is to break that. If we can't even break that whatever we do, wherever we are, we'll never find acceptance, we'll never find we are part of this society.

We must be accepted as individuals and as members of our communities. Our different identities shouldn't just disappear. The problem with this society is that difference means something better or worse.

A: *It is often said that people like us are a mixture of cultures. What is your view?*

R.S.: Yes we are — each of us is a very interesting melding of different cultures. For instance, I look at some Asian-American, Asian-Canadian women, and many of them are very strong on feminism and women's rights. But at the same time a lot of them lead very traditional lives at home, socially and culturally. I find this an interesting contradiction that needs to be resolved. It's wrong to pass judgement on them. What the women are doing is exploring the territory; they are trying to find out what things can fit together within the present day concept of what women are and where they are going in this Western society.

We have here the emergence of a whole new culture — the Asian-North American culture. It is its own being, its own animal. It is not the fragment of one culture or another.

A: *What do you see as the role of the writer in this context?*

R.S.: I consider myself a political artist. I laugh at artists who say they are not political. Whatever we do has an impact on society. You cannot be apolitical. Many mainstream writers consider themselves to be apolitical. But the joke of it is that they are totally political.

To my mind *Yellow Fever* is a deliberately political play. It is conceived as a reflection of reality both for Asians to think about and for mainstream society to look at and understand how Asians have been treated.

A: *To turn to another issue — what are you working on now?*

R.S.: A bunch of things. A film in Los Angeles on the North American-Japanese internment camp experience. It happened this way. A film producer, who was working with native people in Arizona, was told by an elderly native American that back in the 40's the Japanese were brought to the reserves for internment. This producer found the parallel between the native Americans in the reserves and Japanese Americans in the camps very interesting. This producer asked Wayne Wang the film maker of *Chan is Missing* to work on the film. But he was already busy with something else but he mentioned me. I had just seen the Japanese film *Muddy River* about two boys and loved it. So I said why don't we do a movie about two boys — a Japanese-American and a native American on a reservation. A small film about these kids — a metaphor for the larger experience. The producer agreed with the idea and six months later I completed the first draft.

I am also working on a sequel to *Yellow Fever*. It is supposed to be produced next summer in San Francisco.

Then I'm working on a musical in New York. It's also on an Asian-American theme — about a Japanese who doesn't think of himself as Japanese but has all these social and emotional problems. His father, who was in San Francisco, retires and comes out to New York. This triggers a whole series of events which he has to deal with in terms of his own identity. I think it is a lot of fun: the music is a lot of fun. It's a light satire. It could be called 'The Curse of the Flower Drum Song' of the 80's.

A: *What do you think the future holds for Asian-Canadian artists?*

R.S.: I think there is soon going to be a breakthrough for Asian North American artists.

It is interesting. In the 60's society was in convulsion, rock'n'roll etc. In the 70's society just eased and gave in to the recession. Every one just wanted to do their little job and be quiet.

But what was happening also was the Asian communities were beginning to cook, to simmer. It was like a whole underground thing. It's just now starting to break the surface. All the people who were working with communities trying to raise the consciousness of Asians, all those who were working in colleges and universities developing their craft as artists, writers, they are just beginning to come out in to the open. The eighties are going to be for the Asians in North America; it is our decade. ▀

TERRY WATADA

SINGING THE ASIAN CANADIAN BLUES



Steve Isozaki

by
gordon
takehara

*Young Vincent,
He died so needlessly
In the city streets.
And once again
Justice triumphs
Over adversity.*

*Well on the roof
We sang our songs so sweet.
But all our words
Mean nothing today.*

Terry Watada's latest song talks of Vincent Chin, the victim of outrageous and malevolent racism in Detroit. The bitter sarcasm and rage in the intent is enhanced by the poignancy of the rendering. At a recent concert in Oberlin College, Ohio, Watada delivered a moving performance to an unsuspecting audience, a first time audience. The high point was *Vincent*. Watada begins the song with another song written by a Chinese Canadian folksinger of the late 1960s. That song is sadly sweet and filled with the optimism of the times. However when juxtaposed with Vincent Chin's murder, the idealism melts away into bitter irony that inspires anger and shame for all that America has become. In this one song, comprised of mood changes in lyric and stylistic changes in music, Watada demonstrates his versatility as a guitarist and singer, his sensitivity as a composer, his commitment as an Asian Canadian community worker, and his concern as a humanitarian.

Such dedication has been the hallmark of many Asian American composers. There is in fact a viable, albeit young, Asian American musical tradition in the United States. In 1970, *A Grain of Sand* with Chris Iijima, Joanne Miyamoto and Charlie Chin addressed, for the first time on record, Asian American community and identity issues. It also advocated the beginning of a solidarity movement amongst the "third world" communities of the United States.

1977, however, marked the true beginning of the music epoch. *Yokohama California* appeared, restating the concerns of *A Grain of Sand*. Since then, Hiroshima, the Asian American recording group, has produced three records. Russell Baba, Deems Tsutakawa and Jon Jang have released jazz albums. And Charlie Chin and Chris Iijima have released a long awaited reunion album. There are others but the aforementioned have directed their efforts towards an Asian American sensibility, an Asian American culture.

In Canada, there is a relative paucity of effort save for that of Terry Watada. To date, he has produced three albums with a fourth on the way. Although his prolific output has cost him a great deal in time, energy and money, he feels it's essential to build up a substantial body of work. "The record album," he says, "is the finished canvas for all song writers." Recording, then, is the logical end to musical expression. Moreover it is the chronicle of artistic growth. "It's all there for anyone to hear. The natural progression of thinking and skill is there when you listen to an artist's work as a whole. Unfortunately, there are too few of us around who write and sing about us, the Japanese and Chinese of North America."

There is a degree of pessimism in what he says but, by his own admission, he does see reason for hope. "Down in San Francisco, there's a lot happening. At a bar called 'Kanzaki's', Asian musicians work out every night. They're a living culture. One night, a vocal group called The Asian Persuasions did a couple of sets that were just great. They blew me away with their Motown sound, and they were all in their fifties!" For Watada, these are moments of great inspiration which help him survive during the relative isolation of the time between. "Once I got down to the Nisei Lounge in Chicago. I convinced a group of Sansei to join me there. For one night, it must have seemed like the old days for the owners. Even Tokyo Rose was there! Lots of songs came out of that night!"



During the 1960s, Watada went through the apprenticeship of any novice musician. "I played in every basement band and every Buddhist Church band I could find," he remembers. "We used boxes for drums, cheap crystal mikes and \$15.00 guitars." Through a succession of bands, he honed his performance and musical skills. Finally, he landed in a Chinatown band called The Asia Minors. What was so different about them was that they were all second or third generation Asian Canadians. "The Asia Minors were unique but we weren't aware of our uniqueness. No one in the band ever pointed out that we were all Asians. I guess unconsciously we were seeking the comfort of familiarity in one another. That was enough I suppose. Unfortunately, being aware doesn't allow for a unified effort to make a statement about ourselves, so we mainly played top forties material." Be that as it may, Watada used that period to become an accomplished performer.

1970 was the beginning of a musical epoch for Watada. *A Grain of Sand* was released and so started a generation of hitherto unknown musicians expressing themselves in song. "Chris, Joanne and Charlie proved to me that it was possible to write about my history, my community and myself and to perform these songs with pride and sincerity." Thus Watada began to write. In 1972, he wrote his first song *New Denver*, which was about his parents' love for one another and the camp ordeal which tested that love. His only audience was a small group of Asian Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver who were just starting to think about their collective identity.



During 1977, the Japanese Canadian Centennial Year, the community consciously looked for its artists to give voice to the celebrations. Terry Watada seemed a natural choice. At the first Sansei Conference in Canada, Watada walked out onto the stage with a make-shift band, which included a somewhat nervous Rick Shiomi, and impressed the crowd with his music. They gave him a standing ovation. That response and a similar one at the first Powell Street Festival in Vancouver convinced him and a few friends to record an album. "We did it on two successive weekends in a basement studio. Primitive environment but very exciting, all things considered." Ten songs were recorded: eight selected to form *Runaway Horses*. Martin Kobayakawa and Garry Kawasaki from the Sansei Conference concert sat in on the sessions. Kobayakawa himself contributed the melodious yet melancholy *Scenes*. Frank Nakashima, another old friend of Watada's, rounded out the ensemble's sound with his talented flute and guitar. Larry Sasaki, Watada's co-producer, added percussion and a strange instrument called an Acoustic Simulator. "Larry (as engineer) did his best to give the record a clean sound but given the conditions... I guess we can be excused for our growing pains."

*Down in San Francisco,
there's a lot happening.*

Runaway Horses was accepted by Canada's Museum of Man as part of its permanent collection

The songs themselves are strong evidence of Watada's lyrical talent. In *Go for Broke*, he relate the trials of the 442nd Battalion members and the No-No Boys of World War II and the implication of their experiences for Asians in North America today. *Weeping Stars* and *Alberta Blues* recount the ritual of going to the West to find one's roots. Furthermore, there is an exploration of the present state of the community in the songs *Women of the Earth*, *Sansei Theme* and *Runaway Horses*. The crowning glory of the album is *New Denver*. In it Watada captures the poignancy of the Japanese Canadian plight: the emotional upheaval of the internment years is seen to cross several generations, permanently scarring the individual and collective consciousnesses of the victims.

Although the album was a financial success, its importance must be measured in other terms. *Runaway Horses* was accepted by Canada's Museum of Man as part of its permanent collection. The lyrics are required reading for certain courses at the University of British Columbia and the University of Hawaii. Several tape and film productions across the country have used it as part of their soundtrack. *Runaway Horses* was truly a milestone album.

Birds on the Wing, Watada's second effort, was recorded in an eight month period during 1979. It was a gruelling experience because he and his cohorts tried to do the impossible. "It was like hitting your head against the wall. We were trying to get out of a four track tape machine a twenty-four track sound." The result was a record of good songs, harmonious and slick, but lacking in spontaneity. Part of the problem may have been the number of musicians used. No less than fourteen different players were involved, never together and never in one session.

This record was of Asian Canadian musicians. Ed Koyama, Dave Kai and John Saisho shine in their recorded debuts. *Morning Star*, *Crying the Blues Away* and *Birds on the Wing*, conscious efforts by Watada to break his folksong constraints are very impressive when the three aforementioned players are featured. Musicians from his "church basement" days are there to lend credibility to *The Ballad of Yellow Boy* and *the Wandering Chinaman*, a mordant recalling of those days. Interestingly enough, The Asia Minors reunite to play *Midnight Highway*. In it, Watada captures the style of the 1960s with exuberance.

The outstanding song of the album, however, is *China Nights*. It alone is reminiscent of *Runaway Horses* yet pushes into new musical areas. It takes the classic *Shina no Yoru*, a Japanese hit song of the 1930s, and intermingles the thoughts of an imprisoned Nisei that the original song inspires. What results is a profound song with powerful images and implications. *Birds on the Wing* lacks the spontaneity of *Runaway Horses* but the sincerity and assiduous concern is still there.

From 1980 to 1983, during several intermittent live sessions, Watada, Sasaki and a set band recorded the thundering *Night's Disgrace*. This, as yet unreleased double album, is impassioned and intense. Moreover, it represents a new direction for Watada, one that is more mature, vigorous and technically impressive. There are eighteen songs played by a dynamic band consisting of Ed Koyama, Dave Kai, John Saisho, Bruce Tatemichi, Frank Nakashima, Ted Lumb and Garry Kawasaki: the best of the Watada alumnae. The addition of Roy Miya as contributor and sideman was an ingenious stroke. A jazz musician of many years, Miya has kicked around town playing the music he loves, forsaking popularity for obscurity.

"Roy is truly a musical genius," says Watada. "I asked him the night before his scheduled session to contribute a song or two. He came in with six brand new songs! When he played one, he brought tears to my eyes it was so beautiful!" Watada is referring to *The Hawk Cries a Bitter Blue*, a collaboration between Watada's lyrics and Miya's music: it is a beautiful song about city alienation. In fact, the entire album explores the impact of the city and its ramifications on the visible minority. From the elegant *Jazz on a Rainy Day* to the vitriolic *Maverick Chinaman*, Watada has infused jazz and blues stylings to vivid cityscape imagery.

*The city was all jazz.
The street lined with broken hearts
Lit up like pinball machines screaming tilt.
People dressed like mannikins
wasted time
Waiting for meaning to drop from
the skies.*

(T. Watada 1983)

Night's Disgrace begins with a rhythm and blues feel and then moves onto a classic blues mode. *Romance of the Road* is classic Junior Wells and *If I Sing the Blues* could have come from the lips of Sarah Vaughn. From there the album turns into jazz explorations which illustrate the adventures Watada has had in the dens of Chinatown and Chicago. *3439 North Sheffield* is about the group of Sansei that took over Chicago's Nisei Lounge for one night and met the one and only Tokyo Rose.





Jack Selo

The next movement presents Watada and the band at their best. Through the raucous almost violent songs of side three, a strong sense of rancour develops. *City of Lights*, *Cheyenne and the Weasel*, *On the Edge* and *Maverick Chinaman* combine to form a solid vision of the city that is at once frightening and intriguing. Watada's enmity for racism, classism and apathy comes out full force in the performance of these songs. The final movement brings home the deep sadness that Watada feels. The pain of *The Rose of St. Urbain* and the morose reprise of *The Hawk* and *Night's Disgrace* end on a note of cynicism. The ideals of his youth whether dealing with love or society have faded somewhat, tinged by a sad wisdom.

*In everyone's life
Romance must give way to reality.*
(T. Watada 1983)

Yellow Fever, Rick Shiomi's play, was performed in Toronto in 1983. Terry Watada was one of the producers of the play. The Toronto run of *Yellow Fever* coincided with the production of yet another Watada album. "I felt to make Toronto's *Yellow Fever* unique I would contribute a theme song – something that's never been done in any of the other productions. Later I thought why not make a record and utilize the musicians and singers of Canasian."

*The future looks bright for Terry Watada:
a film for the N.F.B., a new jazz album, a music video,
new plays and concerts in Canada and the U.S.*

Therefore, during the summer of '83, at the height of *Yellow Fever*'s preproduction and rehearsals, Watada and his band walked into a twenty-four track studio and fifteen hours later came out with a polished four song E.P. (extended play record).

Yellow Fever, the record, is impressive. The musicians, Ed Koyama, Ian Nishio, Ted Lumb, Dave Kai and Bruce Tatemichi, play with verve and style. The background singers (Bob Lem, Paul Cheung, Brenda Kamino, Kathy Adachi and Jane Luk), most from the theatre production, are a new wrinkle in Watada's approach to arrangements.

The title track exemplifies the themes of the play. Watada rails against racism to a funky, jazz inspired beat. *If I Sing the Blues* and *Crying the Blues Away* are re-worked versions of earlier songs. Certainly the production values alone are reason enough to listen to these versions. The final track, *Kyoto Romance*, features Jane Luk's haunting voice and tells the story of Frank and Megumi Kadota, two Nisei exiled from North America for falling in love. Apparently Frank Kadota met and fell in love with Megumi Yoshino while studying at Berkeley. Because he was a Canadian and she an American, neither government would accept them as citizens together. Hence their only alternative was to move to Japan, renouncing North American citizenships. Watada has captured the tragedy of their situation: in order to consummate their love, the couple had to give up "our family, our home, our own community."

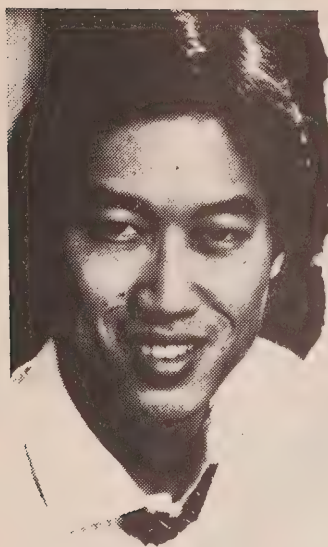
Yellow Fever, the record, represents a significant step for Watada. "Using a full studio," he observes, "with twenty-four tracks, professional people and all the electronic wizardry really puts everything on the line. I felt an extreme amount of pressure to produce and perform well. But the musicians played better and tighter than I've ever heard them and the outside world started to notice." And indeed it did: Sam the Record Man has picked it up; various radio stations in Toronto have played it, and many Asian American organizations have offered to distribute all his records. Moreover, various concert dates are pouring in for him. Even a national tour has been offered.

The future looks bright for Terry Watada. The as yet unreleased fourth album should be available early in 1984. His audience is rapidly growing. New projects are in the making: a film for the National Film Board of Canada, a new jazz album by the fall of 1984, a music video, new plays to produce and concerts in Canada and the United States.

Tommy Woon of Oberlin College describes Watada's music as the "Asian Blues", sweet melodies but definitely the blues. Indeed Watada would agree except that he feels his music is getting tougher. "The musicians I use have caused this change in me. They're rock solid and always play on the edge. My music's got to reflect that."

Ultimately however the issues have also gotten tougher. Vincent Chin's murder is just one example of such. Watada's music reflects the ever changing times, and in turn, these times inspire his voice to express the anger, the shame and the hope for the times to change for the better. ▢

For more information on Terry Watada write to:
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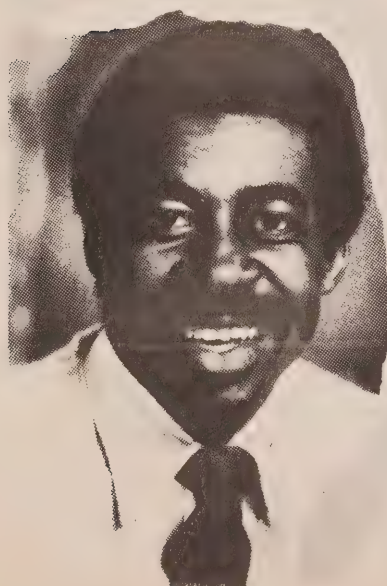


*When it comes down to it
I'm in the programme
largely to develop myself
and exploit my own
talents regardless of my race.*

*Now, if everything
was fair in society
and there was no dis-
crimination, then you
don't need a program
like this.*

CBC's

VISIBLE MINORITY TRAINING PROGRAM



*A recent headline
proclaimed "Black Riot in
Brixton" when the story
under it was patently about
demonstrations by British youth
— black and white ...
That is something I would not do.*

by
mina wong
and
l. preyra

English language TV and radio in Canada are almost totally white preserves. This is at odds with the composition of the population. For instance, about one-quarter of the 2.1 million people living in Toronto belong to "visible minority" communities. And yet Toronto has only seven TV reporters from these communities.

TV is a powerful medium. It holds out a mirror to society. It helps to form our collective self-image. By refusing to reflect "visible minorities" properly, TV in Canada is sending back to Canadians a distorted picture of present day Canadian reality.

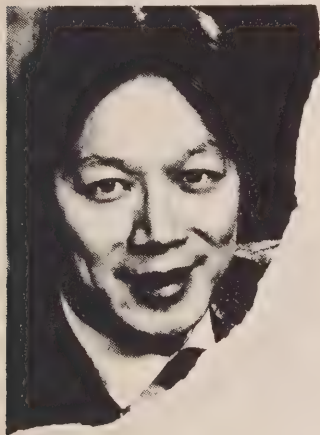
The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in cooperation with the Multiculturalism Directorate of the Secretary of State's Department, has taken a small step to change that. It has set up a programme to train "visible minorities" in broadcast journalism (TV and radio). Eight candidates (see brief biographical notes) from all over Canada recently completed the five-week course in Toronto under this program. They are now back in their home towns for seven months of on-the-job training with CBC stations.

Mina Wong of *The Asianadian* interviewed three of the programme participants. Leonard Preyra prepared the article.

ASIANADIAN: In your opinion, what is this programme all about?

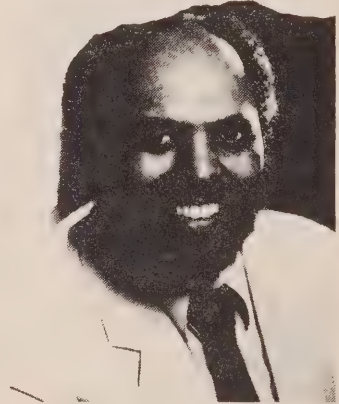
BOYD: I think it's about getting minorities on the air, on the CBC, to show that there are diverse cultures across the country and that there is a different perspective on the news.

CHAN: I suppose that is the reason. I really don't know. Over 800 people applied for six positions. Then the CBC decided, after three interviews, to choose eight. They selected a cross section of the visible minorities. One black woman, two black men, one Chinese woman, two Chinese men, one East Indian woman and one native Indian man... All bases were covered ... reds, browns, yellows, blacks.



▶ **Anthony Chan**, university lecturer and author of *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World*, from Saskatoon. Anthony obtained a Ph. D. in Chinese studies from York University. He has written extensively for various periodicals, including *The Canadian Forum*, and *Quill and Quire*. A passionate baseball fan, Anthony was once scouted by the Baltimore Orioles.

Paul Winn, a black Canadian from Vancouver, is Regional Chief for the Anti-Discrimination Directorate of the Federal Public Service Commission, Western Region, and host of CBC Vancouver's recently broadcast series, *The Canadians*. Paul has had extensive experience in the community development field. ▶



A: How have your colleagues from the CBC reacted to the programme?

CHAN: There's a lot of flak from the people in the CBC who applied for the programme – visible minorities, non-whites – who are not too pleased. They were unhappy that even though they were in the system, they were not selected. I mean if you apply for something and you don't get selected you feel resentful. The PR has been quite bad. The *Toronto Sun* didn't like the programme. They called it reverse discrimination. The *Toronto Star* didn't like it. The only paper which talked positively about it was one in Halifax. So the press has been bad, pretty negative.

What the CBC wanted to do was facilitate the entry of visible minorities into the CBC. Now, if everything was fair in society and there was no racism in Canada, then you don't need a programme like this. But, because there is racism in Canada, you need a programme like this. If everybody looked at other people based on their ability rather than the colour of their skin, that's fine. But we have people here whose ancestry is of the Third World, who were born in Canada; they're Canadians and they don't get a chance because they're coloured people.

The programme raises the consciousness of people concerning the fact that Canada is made up of different types of people ... different hues. This is not to say that these eight people in the programme are not skilled or talented, because everybody in the programme is skilled in different fields. For example, George is a radio broadcaster and he can write. I can write. Some of the people have worked in film things like that.

A: Why were you picked?

CHAN: Who knows? They liked my book (*Gold Mountain*, reviewed April 1983 issue, *The Asianadian*). They knew I was a writer. Basically broadcast journalism relies on writing. You have to write stories. You

have to be able to tell a story. I wrote two books which tell a story about something. I did an interview show in Halifax on the community network. One called *Minority Perspective* and the other called *Sketches of Chinese Canada*. I was a disc jockey for a jazz programme when I was a student at the University of Victoria. They knew I could adapt because I've lived in almost every city in Canada and a lot of cities in the States, and I lived in London and Peking. They wanted somebody who is energetic, intelligent – who could do this course.

BOYD: All of us have some experience in journalism or broadcasting or writing. I was a radio reporter for about three years before I got selected.

A: *What do you expect to get out of the programme?*

CHAN: This is a gruelling course. These five weeks. The course deals with many aspects of journalism: writing, scripting, performing on TV, how to get your message across, what sort of "presence" you have. These things can be learned. These are all skills. The course is a producer's course, so when we leave at the end of five weeks we will be producers. My contract says that I am a writer-broadcaster. So I'll be a writer-broadcaster when I go to Edmonton. Essentially that means reporting on the news, on current affairs and the like.

BOYD: We are all going to be writer-broadcasters. Which means producing shows for current affairs.



BOYD: Yeah! It's a different form of communication. I think the skills, basically the job skills, are what we are all going to get out of this programme – producing, directing, interviewing.

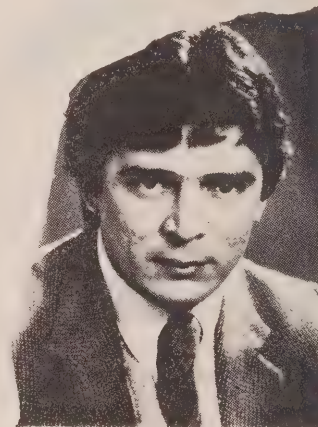
CHAN: To turn out good journalists is what CBC want to do. So that when people switch on their TVs they'll say "there's George Boyd" or, "there's Tony Chan, wow he's got a good story". Not that George is black or I'm Chinese. I mean that's irrelevant really

A: *What is the social relevance of this training programme?*

CHAN: The programme gives you skills in order to do stories that deal with social issues which are important to people. I don't mean

◀ **Claire Prieto**, a Trinidadian-born documentary film producer from Toronto, Claire has a Bachelors degree in radio and television arts from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. She has produced several films including the award-winning (American Film Festival, John Muir Medical Film Festival) *It's Not An Illness*, on the subject of pregnancy and fitness. Claire has worked extensively with immigrant women's organizations in Toronto.

Dan David, a native Canadian from the Oka Reserve in Quebec, an Information Officer with the Assembly of First Nations, Ottawa. Dan is a graduate of the Journalism Program for Native People at the University of Western Ontario, and has worked as a communications researcher and freelance writer. ▶



Meaning five or six minutes, I suppose. Not covering fire stories or cat shows but hard news, like what did Lougheed say, or what did Buchanan say. Sort of like mini-documentaries or backgrounders.

CHAN: For example, the Grenadian invasion. I may want to do a local angle in Edmonton or George may want to interview some Grenadians. How they feel, do they have any relatives in Grenada.

The course will give me skills to communicate in a different way. Before I was writing in book form. This is writing for television using visuals, stills, footage – you know, shooting things outside or inside and bringing them together to tell a story in four minutes or so. It's a different way of talking about what people are doing.

bureaucrats or politicians, but real people that are affected by the decisions of bureaucrats and politicians. This programme gives us the skills to do stories with a social conscience, or stories that are conscious of the social reality, meaning the things that go on in society.

A: *But do journalists really have the authority to make these decisions?*

CHAN: Sure, oh yeah! Journalists should make decisions about what stories to tell. Stories that reflect on things that affect us: like human suffering, what makes people happy, or what makes them laugh, things like that. Those are interesting stories. I think all of us have stories because we come from a non-white society. Although we are in a white

society we come from a non-white society and we have stories that reflect our own society – black society, or white society.

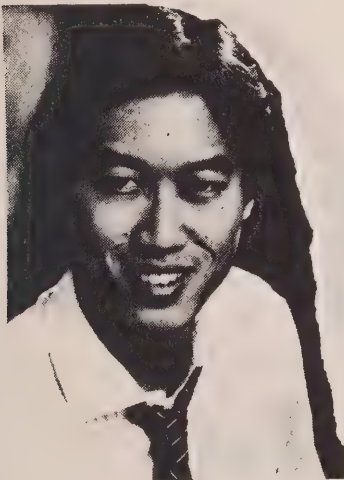
BOYD: Social conscience could mean that by us eight being on the air we will be able to show that the news is not just reports. The news has feeling, it has humanity involved in it. By the stories we cover we will show that people in the news do have a social conscience. We will have a distinct way of looking at things.

Headlines have a way of cementing perceptions and reinforcing stereotypes. For example, a recent headline proclaimed "Blacks Riot in Brixton" when the story under it was patently about demonstrations by British youth – both black and

white. A recent story in the Toronto newspapers quoted an MPP out of context apparently, who has been warning of unrest in a mixed racial district in the city. The story was placed directly beside another which basically promoted the Ku Klux Klan. That's something I would not do if I were involved.

We'll be giving the majority of people a different perspective. Visible minorities will benefit as well because they will be better represented.

LAM: I don't look on myself as an "ethnic reporter". Although from one perspective I can look on this programme as a break for Chinese broadcasters. I'm not being sent to Vancouver as the ethnic reporter to report on things happening in the Chinese community; although if a story comes out of the Chinese community, I will cover it, I will have a better perspective on it. But there are a lot of other things that affect everybody whether they're Chinese or any other ethnic denomination. I'm happy to go as a reporter or a journalist and I'm not confined to one specific area. However, having a story covered by someone who doesn't look white adds to the idea of Canada as a nation of everybody.

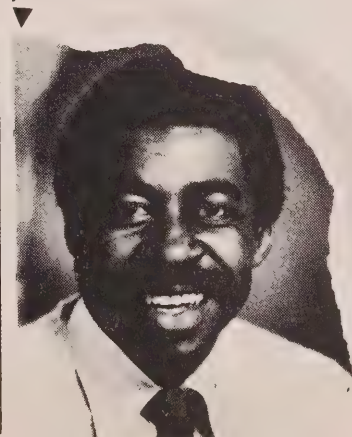


▲ **Jari Brodie**, of Chinese descent, is a Ph. D. from York University, where she taught Canadian culture, folklore and literature for the Department of Humanities. Recently Jari has worked in television as a researcher and freelance reporter.

▶ **David Lam**, of Chinese descent, is a graduate of the University of Manitoba in film studies and has a variety of experience in the communications field, having worked as a documentary filmmaker, freelance writer and public relations officer. He recently spent two years in Taiwan where he worked as a teacher and business writer.

▶ **Deepa Mehta**, a Canadian of East Indian descent, a graduate in philosophy from the University of New Delhi, is a documentary filmmaker whose work as writer, producer and director has won 20 international awards. Recently Deepa played the principal lead in the drama *Reasonable Force*, part of the CBC series *For the Record*.

▼ **George Boyd**, a fifth generation descendant of black loyalists, attended St. Mary's University in Halifax, and the Nova Scotia Institute of Technology. George has experience in the book publishing field and is presently working as a radio news reporter in Halifax.



On the West Coast, in Vancouver, there is the second-largest Chinese population in North America (the first one being San Francisco). But name a Chinese broadcaster! There's nobody on TV that's Chinese. That's a serious flaw in TV demographics. Walk down Granville Street in Vancouver and one out of every four people will be Chinese or Oriental but you don't see that on TV. So as far as that sort of thing goes, I guess I feel a certain sort of responsibility. But that's not my cause. When it comes down to it, I'm in the programme largely to develop myself and exploit my own talents regardless of my race.



A: Chinese broadcasting in Toronto is doing quite well and really developing very, very fast. How do they see you three Chinese people being trained at the CBC? Can they relate to you and can you relate to them at all?

LAM: I think they're pleased that three Chinese are in on this programme. I suspect that they're looking at it this way: that there are three Chinese out in the community across Canada who are representative in the media of the Chinese people. They think that I'm going to be the ethnic reporter; which is something I don't intend to be. And which I will never be.

Recently I heard that one of the local Chinese newspapers did an interview with Jari Brodie who is a Chinese woman. The guy who did the interview had seen her picture in the paper and was all excited. That's good for community morale.

I don't have a lot of anti-white society feelings. There are some guys and women in this course who take a bit of a hard line, that is "Us against Them". Which is I suppose valid in one light. But it's just a rever-

sal of white society hating coloured groups. So that's really not any part of my attitude at all. I was born in this country and I think this is probably the best country in the world to live in as far as freedoms go and diversity and tolerance.

When you put people together you have problems, and this whole racial business is one of the problems that people have to deal with. I'm not saying that I'm not going to meet with anti-Chinese feeling - I

look Chinese but I'm not Chinese. To me somebody Chinese is somebody who was born in China, who lives there or who is brought up there. I'm a Canadian citizen who happens to be of Chinese origin. 



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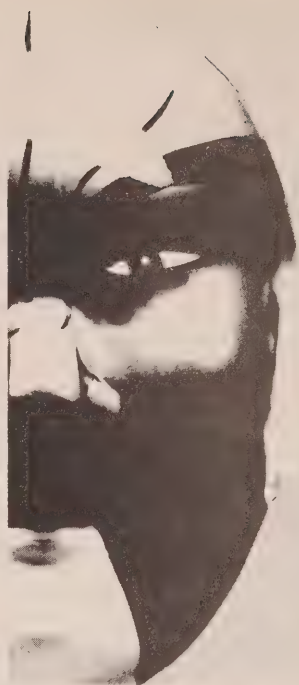
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TEN YEARS OF ASIAN CANADIAN LITERARY ARTS IN VANCOUVER



by
jim
wong-chu

"*Gum San Po* translates to Golden Mountain News, but in reality, it was a journal, a sort of forerunner to *The Asianadian* and our anthology, *Inalienable Rice*," said Sean Gunn recalling his experiences working as one of the editors along with Garrick Chu, Don Jang and Gordy Mark in producing community-oriented literature in 1973.

The *Gum San Po* folded after two issues due to inexperience and the lack of writers. But, in these two issues, *Gum San Po* managed to bring forward two important topics of concern – history and discrimination. The first issue that came off the press focussed on the need to legitimize the histories of both the Chinese and Japanese communities, since there was little acknowledgement at that time of any history different from the one taught in academic institutions.

Displayed boldly on the front page was a 1925 photograph of a Chinese railway track gang in the Rockies. Also included were the chronological histories of both the Chinese and Japanese Canadians. This issue also included poetry by Glen Nagano and Sean Gunn. Identity was the central theme, as exemplified in Sean Gunn's *Orientalism* # 7:

*I saw 2 Blacks
pass each other
and as they did
they called out brother.*

*I saw an Asian
later that day
and as he passed
I looked away.*

"*Racism*" was the headline on the second issue. This was in response to the quaint 'travelogue' type articles which appeared in the November edition of Maclean's *Leisure Magazine*, and the September-October edition of *B.C. Motorist*. In its front page, *Gum San Po* cited numerous examples of racist journalism written by non-Asians in the past.

In its front page
Gum San Po
cited numerous
examples of racist
journalism written
by non-Asians

This issue also includes Sean Gunn's much quoted and reprinted parody *Lofawn Town* – a shoe-on-the-other-foot satire about a Chinatown resident's view of the exotic mysteries and debauchery in "White Man's Town". Sean's article closes with one of his famous puns:

Lofawn Town...must be preserved, not only as an integral part of the All-Canadian, Vertical Mosaic but also for the benefit of future tortoises.

A tortoise and a hare once had a race. The tortoise eventually won, proving again that one should never under-estimate another's race.

The years following 1973 were active times in the Chinese Canadian community. As one active member said, "Most of our writings went into pamphlets and protest leaflets."

The years prior to 1977 were also energetic times in Japan town as members in their community were busy preparing events and projects to celebrate their centennial year. In 1977, a historical photographic exhibition began to tour the country. This was followed up by a book, *A Dream of Riches* published the following year.

During 1977, the first copies of *The Crossroads Monthly*, a Toronto based bilingual Chinese Canadian publication which later evolved into the present day *The Asianadian*, reached Vancouver.

In December, 1977, Ken Shikaze called together Garrick Chu, Sean Gunn, Paul Yee, Linda Uyehara Hoffman, Rick Shiomi and others, all members of the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop and the Powell Street Revue, for a meeting. The result was a Chinese-Japanese anthology, *Inalienable Rice*. Published with the help of a Secretary of State grant in 1979, *Inalienable Rice* included contributions from individuals such as: Gordon Hirabayashi, a Seattle born Nisei, who challenged at the U.S. Supreme Court the legitimacy of an-

The highlight of this effort was a group of erotic short stories entitled *Asianporn*

cestry as a basis for curfew restrictions and forced exclusion during World War II; Art Shimizu, who was involved with the campaign to abolish the Canadian War Measures Act; and Patrick Chen, who represented Vancouver at the first national conference in support of the protest against the CTV program W5 held in Toronto.

There were interviews with artist Roy Kiyooka and Chinatown activist Bing Thom. Joy Kogawa contributed an excerpt from her then soon-to-be-published novel, *Obasan* which has since won the Governor General Award for Literature. New poets – Audrey Kobayashi, Helen Koyama, Roy Miki, Terry Watada, Paul Yee, Jim Wong-Chu, as well as Sean Gunn and Glen Nagano contributed poems. Approximately 600 copies were printed but like many small press publications, distribution was a problem.

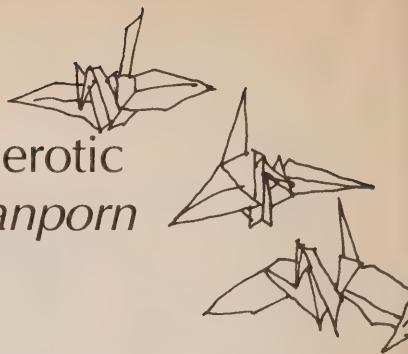
During 1979, Sing Lim, a retired N.F.B. artist, completed *West Coast Chinese Boy*. This is an illustrated children's book about his memories as a young boy growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown. It is reviewed in this issue of *The Asianadian*.

In 1980, encouraged by Cheuk Kwan, The Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop and the Powell Street Revue prepared a special Vancouver edition of *The Asianadian* (Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall '80). This edition included an excerpt, in short story form, of Rick Shiomi's play *Yellow Fever*, as well as a series of writings from a workshop given by Seattle poets Lawson Fusao Inada and Alan Chong Lau (The Buddha Bandits) who came to Vancouver to give a poetry reading at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre. The highlight of this effort, however, was a group of erotic short stories entitled *Asianporn* by Paul Yee, Sky Lee and Rick Shiomi.

In 1981, moving on the momentum of the group effort in *The Asianadian* the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop and the Powell Street Revue approached *West Coast Review*, a Simon Fraser University sponsored literary publication. This resulted in a special summer edition entitled *Asian Canadians and the Arts*. A small honorarium was paid to each writer for every accepted piece of work which gave a tremendous boost to some of the writers in the group.

Gum San Po's original aspiration to entrench and legitimize the Asian community's history was carried on by three major events – the first being the C.B.C. docu-drama film *Gold Mountain – The Chinese in Canada*. Through the efforts of producer-director, Terry Filgate, and researcher, Nancy Ing, *Gold Mountain* received nation-wide screening on November 11, 1981.

The second major event was the publishing of a comprehensive academic work *From China To Canada, a History of Chinese Communities in Canada* (McClelland and Stewart). The book was written in part by Harry Con, Ron Con, J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, and William Willmott. Then there was the publication of Anthony B. Chan's *Gold Mountain, The Chinese in the New World* (New Star Press, 1983). Chan describes his book as a 'gut' book – a personal view of the social history of Chinese Canadians. In his final chapter, entitled "Touching the Past", he talks about the growth of writing in Asian Canada – from a poem scratched on the wall of the Victoria Immigration building by a newly arrived Chinese immigrant in 1919 to the efforts of present day writers:





...a trickle of poetry and prose began to emerge from Vancouver and Toronto.

As the colony of writers expanded, more Asian Canadians entered the world of literature, drawing courage from the successes of those who had gone before... Its central assertion was that Asians in Canada would be creators of their own stereotypes and myths.

Indeed with the successful staging of Rick Shiomi's *Yellow Fever* in Toronto and similar success with David Henry Hwang's *FOB* in Vancouver, Asian Canadians are on the horizon of greater possibilities in the areas of playwriting and performing arts. Paul Yee's new children's book *Teach Me To Fly, Skyfighter!* (reviewed in this issue of *The Asianadian*) will also open new doors for Asian Canadian writers.

As one writer has put it: "In the next ten years Asian North American literature and performing arts will be flourishing." ■

CONTRIBUTORS

Meena Dhar is an urban planner, member of the Board of the Riverdale Women's Centre. She is a free lance graphic artist. Her work has appeared in *Fireweed*, a Toronto Feminist Magazine. She contributes frequently to *The Asianadian*.

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EMERGING THEMES In South Asian Canadian Literature

by
suwanda
h.j. sugunasiri



*Life in the homeland
and the immigrant
experience are
important themes
of South Asian
Canadian literature*



This article is based on a paper read by the author at the Sixth Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies held in the University of Guelph, Ontario.

For reasons of space the author's extensive bibliography has been omitted in this article. If you wish to obtain copies of the bibliography please write to *The Asianadian* and enclose one dollar.

The 'South Asian' community in Canada, which numbers 326,000 (Census of Canada, 1981) is made up of people who come, not only from the countries of South Asia, (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) but also from other parts of the world such as East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya), South Africa, the West Indies, South America (e.g. Guyana), Fiji, Mauritius, the Malay Peninsula and European countries (e.g. U.K., Germany), but with origins in South Asia.

A recent survey conducted by the Multiculturalism Directorate of the Secretary of State, Ottawa sought to identify the literary activity of this community in the Canadian setting. Despite efforts to uncover literary activity in all representative languages, reasonable literary activity could be found only in three languages: English, Punjabi and Gujarati. There is a considerable amount of literary activity in Urdu, but that was researched separately. Punjabi activity was found to be mainly centered in Vancouver (where the community goes back to the turn of the century) with some activity in Ontario; Gujarati in Montreal and Toronto; and English all across Canada, with a predominance in the East.

This paper points out some of the emerging themes in the English, Punjabi and Gujarati literature and the concerns of the South Asian Canadian writers in their new environment. The paper, however, is not intended to give a thematic analysis, but rather to introduce the reader to the content of this emerging Canadian literature.

If one were to pick one dominant theme that cuts across the literature of South Asian Canadians written in English and Punjabi it is the immigrant experience. The reasons are obvious: most writers are first generation Canadians. They come mostly from former British colonies, and their "immigrant experience" is peculiarly their own, and reflected in their writings. The following poem by Cyril Dabydeen is an excellent

example, for it encompasses several dimensions of this theme.



For the Sun-Man

*In the Sun-Man's silence
I walk along
I am myself jambu
and other exotic fruits
even though I do not
pluck parables
from the Buddha's
core
Or wonder at ploughing
through the snow
with Hannibal's
beasts –
Ah, maybe being so much
like the west
the metaphors have dried
like rind
new ones have to be created
while I too continue
to nourish
the sun
in my midst
and thinking
of rain-forests
from time to time
in the poem's winter.*



The "Sun-Man's silence", the exotic fruit 'jambu' and the Buddha all symbolize the poet's loss of heritage, or his yearning for it, and "the metaphors [that] have dried like rind" the severance of one's roots. So "new ones [metaphors] have to be created" on the basis of one's original roots if accessible, and if not, as in the case of this poet, on the basis of Western myths (note "Hannibal's beasts"), not uncommonly consciously inverted or distorted.

The immigrant experience is equally strong in Punjabi Canadian poetry, which generally views the 80-year old history of the Punjabis in Canada as one of struggle. Thus the poets, Rampuri, Sadhu and Rode, to name a few, sing of the lot of farm workers, racial incidents and the life of Punjabi immigrants in general. Mittar Rasha's poem *Imprisoned in Heaven* perhaps best summarizes the immigrant's sentiment. The poet feels that while Canada provides luxuries ("a cage of gold, bird feed

of silver") these are not accessible to the immigrant ("to have wings, but not to fly"). In Surjeet Kalsey's *Siddharta Does Penance Again*, we have the immigrant experience as a dehumanizing process:

I've found the path to salvation
from hunger
Now I've transmigrated
from Siddharta
to 'Enlightened Buddha'
(an artist within me has died
I've become one
of the dumbly driven cattle)

The poet tells us that the immigrant has found material salvation in Canada at the cost of her spiritual salvation; so she must do penance once again.

Punjabi short stories also deal with this experience, as exemplified in the work of Amarjit Chahal. Stories in the only collection published by him, *A Man Returned From Overseas*, are primarily of this type as are several stories in Sadhu's collection, *Fell From the Sky*, *Stumbled on a Tree* and Surjeet Kalsey's *Black Hearts White Blood*. Among other topics that have interested minor writers under this general theme are prejudice and discrimination, the lot of the illegal immigrant, the exploitation of the immigrant by relatives and community leaders, the forced change of names and values, culture shock, corruption in the mills, and so on.

In contrast to the Punjabi short story, only a handful of the English short stories relate to the immigrant experience, focusing on such topics as racism, culture conflict, working class life and getting around the law to stay behind in Canada. Among English novels, a single work, Stephen Gill's *The Immigrant*, deals with the experiences of an immigrant within a Canadian context. Bharati Mukherjee's two novels, *Wife* and *The Tiger's Daughter*, examine the immigrant experience in cross-cultural setting – India and the U.S. and Sonny Ladoo's *Yesterdays* does the same for Canada and the Caribbean.

The woman's place in society and wife-beating are themes in Punjabi literature.

Perhaps the strongest expression of the immigrant experience is to be found in the Punjabi Canadian drama. Although a latecomer on the Punjabi literary scene, the few plays written thus far provide sufficient evidence. Indeed both full length plays written and staged by the foremost playwright, Ajmer Rode, emphasize this theme: *Komagata Maru* (dealing with the historical incident) and *The Strange Drama*. Raj Chohan's only play, *The Spark* reflects an extension of the immigrant's experience, as he aims, in the words of Kalsey, to create a "revolutionary awareness in the working class of the world".

Several other Punjabi writers have extended themselves to issues beyond Canada in their homelands. Thus the poets deal with the struggles in their homelands against social inequality, injustice and poverty, and attack existing social and political values. The thrust of this revolutionary fervour is powerfully captured in Dhanjal's poem *Search for Meanings*:

Till today I've plowed grief
and sowed toil in my fields
only hunger has grown
out of them.
Now like 'Bhagan Wala'
(Fateful Person)
I'll sow guns in my fields.
Then the lava will burst out of my soil
and the age-old hunger
will be burnt out.

Examples of poems written in this revolutionary spirit in English are not wanting. One could cite Himani Bannerji's poems in her collection, *Separate Sky: Revolution in Cuba, Revolutions* and *An Imperialist Waltz*, to name a few.

This revolutionary fervour is also reflected in the Punjabi Canadian novel. For example, in all five novels written in Canada by novelist, Gyani Kesar Singh, the intent of the author is "to immortalize the forgotten martyrs of the Indian Independence Movement" and individuals such as

Mewa Singh of the Komagata Maru incident. By contrast, there are no novels in English that even approximate a sense of rebellion.

Life in the homeland is, then, a second theme that finds expression in the literature of South Asian Canadians. Reference has already been made to the link with India's Independence Movement, particularly in the Punjabi novel. Mention has also been made of Mukherjee's English novels that focus on India's upper class life. Among other novels in English that are set in a homeland context, one could refer to Ladoo's *Yesterdays* (though in a cross-cultural setting) and *No Pain Like This Body*, both set in a Caribbean context, and Gool's *Price*, set in a South African context.

It is in the short story, however, that South Asian Canadian writers seem to feel most comfortable in dealing with their homeland. Most stories in Cyril Dabydeen's *Still Close to the Island*, Saros Cowasjee's *Nude Therapy*, Clyde Hosein's *The Killing of Nelson John*, Stephen Gill's *Life Vagaries* and Lino Leitao's *Goan Tales* address this theme. The same general trend is evident in short stories by individual Punjabi writers, nostalgia being a specific focus of interest.

As is to be expected, there is no shortage of poetry in English set in a homeland context. Among others, Asoka Weerasingha's collection *Home Again Lanka* is certainly reflective of its presence, as is Michael Ondaatje's latest work, *Running in the Family*, the result of his search for his roots. The several poems about the Sun-Man in *Elephant and Ice*, among others, can be seen as Rienzi Crusz's contribution to this category.

Love is yet another theme that characterizes South Asian Canadian literature. In Punjabi poetry several dimensions of it are manifest: love of a beloved, waiting for a loved one, pain of separation, wishful thinking of reunion, past memories of love, the search for

South Asian Canadian poets are creating works that...have a breadth and range not usually found in Canadian poetry.

love and affection, and feelings of sorrow, dejection and pessimism arising out of love-relationships.

In poetry written in English, the theme has caught the attention of almost every major author. And in Gujarati poetry there is a major preoccupation with this theme. Among its dimensions, as primarily seen in the poems of Ashwin Vaidya (1964), are the mature love of a husband and wife, both fulfilled and unfulfilled, love for the beloved in the next life, the happiness of love, love of brother toward brother and separation. Roughly the same range of love themes can be seen in the English short story — mature love, dissatisfied love and unfulfilled love. By contrast, Punjabi short stories are short on it, with inter-ethnic love relationships being the only identifiable topic.

The woman's place in society is a theme that has particular expression in Punjabi literature with particular attention to wife-beating, which according to one writer is an "incurable social disease common in many homes in the Punjabi community". Kalsey's poems, *A Rib of Adam* and *She: Without Face*, among others, can be seen as works of this nature, as are her several stories: *Whom Can I Tell My Grief*, *Postponed Life* (in Punjabi) and *Mirage in the Cave* (in English). Paramjit Gill is another woman writer who deals with this theme, as evidenced in her stories *Shashi* and *Happiness*.

The theme finds its expression in Punjabi drama as well. In Ajmer Rode's *Two Ladies*, which deals with the psychological problems of a Punjabi housewife, we have perhaps the only expression of it by a male writer.

If these are some of the more prominent themes in the literature of South Asian Canadians, there are among these writers its philosophers and moralists. In Punjabi, these writers handle universal themes, such as the "triangle of life, existence and half-existence" as

Rode puts it in his poem *Triangle*; and the chaos of machine, war and confusion as Rampuri sees it in his poem *Silence*. At a more romantic level, the Gujarati philosopher-writers sing about life's importance, its worthlessness, its dissatisfactions, the importance of hope in life, and life's different attributes such as friendship, helpfulness, life's struggles and its complexity.

Then there are a host of other themes of South Asian Canadian writers which cannot be put into neat categories. Among them are, in Punjabi poetry, life in Canadian pubs and clubs where the intelligentsia talk about all kinds of topics. Topics such as planets, the space age, wine and women, crime, the materialistic society seen variously as a machine, a system that turns us into robots, brings boredom, monotony and weariness, and precipitates man's fall due to drugs, pollution and so on. Religious devotion is a topic that finds particular expression in Gujarati poetry.

These are the themes that take us all over but there is one theme that brings us back home to Canada and which cuts across the genres of poetry, novel and short story. And that is the theme of Canadian mainstream life. Perhaps the best example of this in English poetry is Michael Ondaatje's work. Having left his homeland of Sri Lanka at the age of 11, he began writing in a pre-multicultural Canada (the official Canadian policy of multiculturalism having been introduced only in 1972). There is nothing in his works, except in his latest, *Running in the Family*, that is not mainstream. In fact, Arun Prabha Mukherjee in her analysis of South Asian Canadian poetry in English, excludes Ondaatje from her discussion precisely for this reason. There is nothing South Asian about him.

Another example of a mainstream poet who writes in English is Suniti Namjoshi. (See her collection *The*

Authentic Lie, Fiddlehead, 1982). Among the novels, Cowasji's *Good-bye to Elsa* is a satirical work on the Canadian academic establishment. But the example par excellence of this genre is Reshard Gool's *The Nemesis Casket* (written under the pseudonym of Ved Dewajee) which revolves around the North-American military-industrial complex and the underground. Gool uses a unique technique which Ronald Sutherland (1983) characterizes as the best example of "Twentieth-century Canadian Baroque" reminiscent of the works of Hubert Aquin and Rejean Ducharme in French and Leonard Cohen in English.

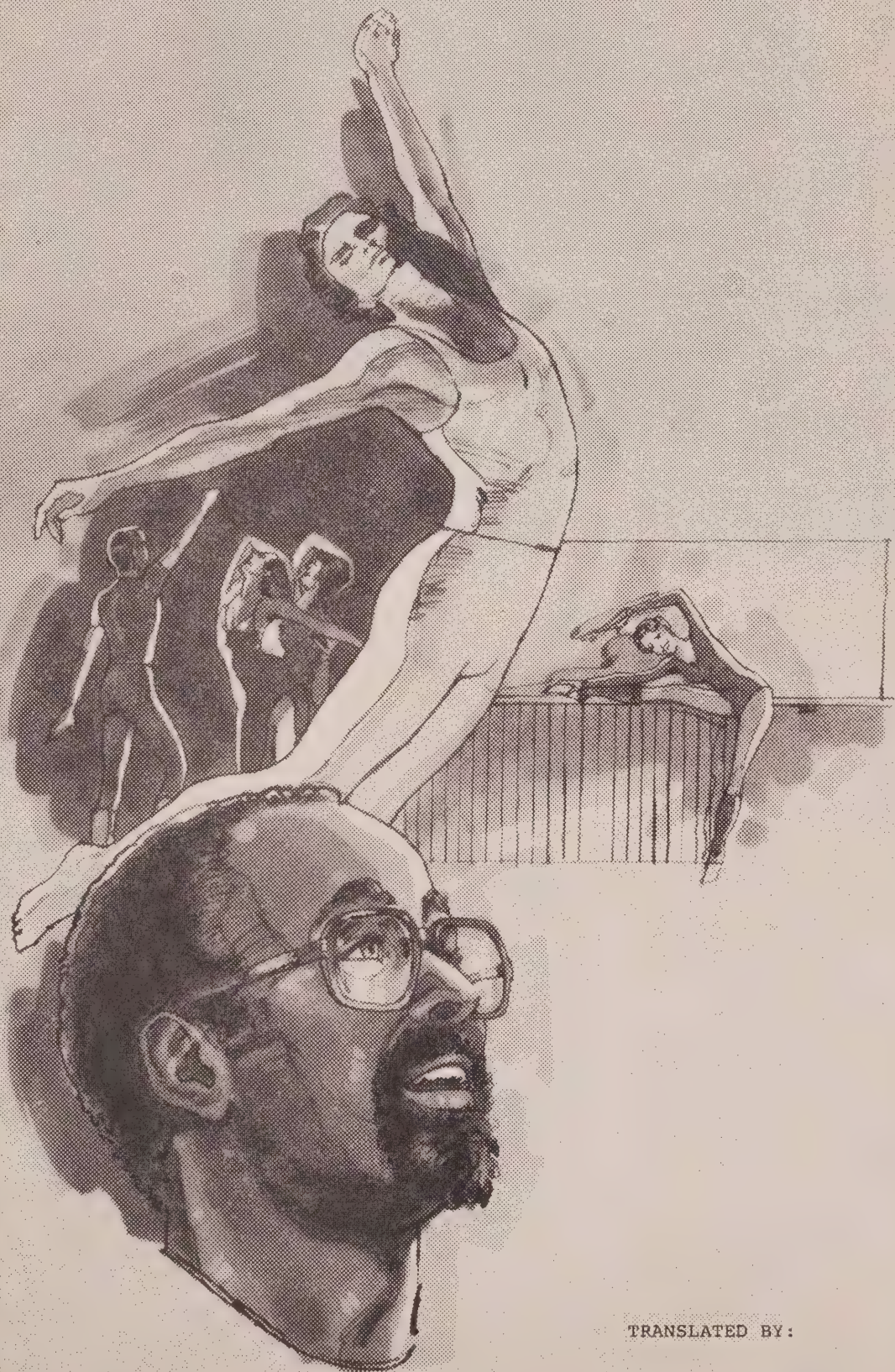
Among the short stories there are several that deal with mainstream life. But the works of Alan Mark Anand stand out. Apparently a second generation South Asian Canadian, he writes with no trace of South Asianness, in content or in style, about rural Atlantic Canada. (See his stories, *A Bagful of Holes* and *Rosie was a Good Old Dog* in *Fiddlehead*, Summer 1975)

Having examined the themes contained in the literature of South Asian Canadians, we may end with the conclusion arrived at by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (1983) in her analysis of South Asian poetry in English:

...the South Asian Canadian poets are creating works that are highly individual and technically sophisticated. Moreover, they have a breadth and range not usually found in Canadian poetry.

While there is no room here to elaborate on the details of Mukherjee's statement, it can be said on the basis of our discussion that, if nothing else, South Asian literature encompasses a wide range of topics, drawn both from their homeland as well as from Canadian society. Given the linguistic, ethnic, geographic, national and religious backgrounds of these writers it is only natural that it be so. ■

MULTICULTURALISM



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Hon. David M. Collenette
Minister of State

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REVIEWS

From Teach Me To Fly, Skyfighter



West Coast Chinese Boy
by Sing Lim, Tundra
Books, 1979, 64 pp.

Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!
by Paul Yee. Illustrated by
Sky Lee. James Lorimer
and Co., 1983, 133 pp.

by
momoye
sugiman

Some Canadians might view the current promotion of heritage language programs and multicultural children's books as superficial displays of progressiveness and tolerance on the part of the federal government. However, one cannot deny that such government sponsored programs are helping to shape healthier, more positive cultural identities and contributing to intercultural understanding.

Two important books which have arrived recently on the multicultural bookshelf focus on the trials and the joys of growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown. In *West Coast Chinese Boy* author/artist Sing Lim, looks back fondly on his own childhood and provides us with powerfully subtle vignettes of life in Chinatown during the 1920s.

A more recent publication, *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!* by Paul Yee, contains four stories or episodes revolving around four dynamic eleven year olds facing contemporary challenges and issues in the very different Chinatown of the 1980s. These two books differ markedly in terms of style, format and mood, yet both offer authentic glimpses into one of Canada's most exciting communities.

Children of any ethnic origin should find *West Coast Chinese Boy* a meaningful and entertaining book. Each page appeals to the child's imagination, arousing him/her sensorially, emotionally and intellectually with simple, imagistic words. There are about a hundred charming pen and ink drawings and doodles – and 22 colourful monotype prints. Thus the book speaks *directly* to children.

The voices, colours, tastes, textures and smells of the Vancouver Chinatown of the 1920s are immediately experienced in Sing Lim's sensitive, impressionistic descriptions of salient people, places and events from his childhood. His mother who married at fifteen and died only 30 years later. His father who arrived in Canada in 1884, worked as a lumberjack and cobbler. Kind, old Uncle Jing, the owner of the local restaurant-cum-meeting place. The derelicts or "viaduct people" who slept in crude shelters constructed from discarded crates. Mr. Kwong, the neighbourhood herbalist with his many drawers of ginseng, seeds, roots, dried insects and reptiles. The great bear paw feast. The nefarious meetings of the Gee Gung Tong or Chinese Free Masons. Escaping the pain of the Chinese School teacher's cane by stuffing newspapers under one's sleeves, socks and cap. A journey to Mountain View Cemetery for the annual Ch'ing Ming remembrance day offerings. A baby's head shave celebration. An uproarious night at the Chinese opera.



From West Coast Chinese Boy

It is difficult to classify *West Coast Chinese Boy* as strictly 'children's literature'. Although the language is sufficiently unblurred and concrete to be grasped by a ten year old, there is a substratum of meaning below the tactile surface and between the short, simple lines – a substratum of meaning which might elude some children. As the author notes in the Afterword: "As I look back on the events of my childhood, some of which happened over sixty years ago, I feel many emotions: love and gratitude, amazement and fear, anger and frustration, but most of all the urge to laugh." Throughout the book, the adult reader is haunted by all these emotions, along with a sense of despair and loneliness, as evidenced in the following description of the apartment below Sing Lim's which housed 20 bachelors:

It was in the apartment downstairs that I saw Western art for the first time. I was six years old, and I still remember the colored pictures that covered the walls of the small parlor, and the black and white prints that lined the hallways. One picture I especially loved. It was a snow scene with hunters on a hilltop followed by a pack of hounds and birds flying overhead.... Mr. Sam, one of the men who lived in the apartment, had worked as a janitor for more than fifty years in offices, stores and theaters. When pictures were thrown out, he salvaged them to brighten up the place.

West Coast Chinese Boy is valuable not only as a work of literature and graphic art, but also as an educational resource. It offers a rare psychological and sociological insight into the immigrant experience



from a child's perspective. It also gives the reader significant snatches of Chinese Canadian history, folklore and customs – bits of the past which are probably never mentioned in social studies or history classes.

The power of this book lies in its multi-facetedness – and in the fact that the author/artist manages to maintain a lucid, child-like lens, never allowing himself to become didactic or melodramatic about the past. In words and in pictures Sing Lim gently weaves a kind of impressionistic tapestry of his memories which readers of all ages can learn from and enjoy.

Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter! by Paul Yee, is aimed at a much more specific age group: nine to thirteen year olds. Yee allows young readers the chance to identify with four bright, energetic eleven year-olds who roam the colourful turf of Vancouver's Chinatown: Canadian-born Sharon who feels self-conscious about her Chineseness; Samson, the kung-fu king and Sharon's chief antagonist in various arenas; John who struggles to smash the demeaning stereotype of the short, skinny kid with glasses and Christine, one of the few white kids in the neighbourhood and

therefore, like Sharon, a minority within a minority.

Yee divides his book into four separate stories. However, these stories are really like four brief episodes in the ongoing and unpredictable saga of life on Pender Street. They are not only held together by the common backdrop of Chinatown and the recurrence of the same four characters, but also by similar themes and tensions. Each story, in isolation, constitutes entertaining reading, but the characters somehow take on deeper dimensions after all the stories have been read and viewed as a whole.

Probably the most striking and believable character is the one whom we first encounter, the assertive Sharon Fong. Sharon's struggle with her hyphenated cultural identity is handled by the author in a delightfully straightforward manner. He notes that she feels uncomfortable around the new immigrant kids from Hong Kong, Vietnam and China, for she perceives them as "shy and clumsy" and is embarrassed by their broken English. Sharon feels trapped by the physical manifestations of her race and is compelled to point out to the world that she is *different*. As Yee writes:

Sharon would never have admitted it aloud, but she disliked Chinatown. Everyone shopping there spoke Chinese, and at the top of their lungs, it seemed. She was never sure what was being said.... Being surrounded by Chinese people made Sharon uncomfortable because she did not feel very Chinese herself. She did not feel that she belonged here at all.



From Teach Me To Fly, Skyfighter

While Sharon feels a certain sense of shame and embarrassment about being Chinese, she deeply resents Samson, for he always appears "so relaxed about being Chinese". Fortunately, in the lead story, "Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!", she begins to come to terms with her inner dilemma through her meeting with her grandfather's friend, Skyfighter, a man who made kites in order to keep his mind alive and prevent himself from growing too bitter. Listening to his reminiscences, Sharon begins to gain an appreciation for the legacy of the Chinese Canadian pioneers. Sharon's struggle with her banana self-concept is often intertwined with her battle against sexist conservatism. Throughout the book she and her friend, Christine, demonstrate that girls are fully capable of tackling any new challenge, from kite flying to soccer. Thus, Sharon clearly transcends the sickening 'China Doll' image of the submissive little girl holding a fan in front of her face.

The four stories in this book might seem saccharine and simplistic in places to the more cynical thirteen year-old, but Paul Yee's collection generally comes across as fairly sophisticated and uncontrived, with just the right dose of reality for the average pre-adolescent to have to deal with. The third person prose is simple and straightforward without seeming too condescending and the experiences of the four pivotal characters manage to convey important messages about cooperation, non-violence, honesty and sexual and racial equality without becoming overly preachy. It is obvious that the author is himself a product of Vancouver's Chinatown, for his light, gently-paced stories reflect a nostalgic affection for the place, a warm and genuine sense of community.

Teach Me How to Fly, Skyfighter! and *West Coast Chinese Boy* deserve to be included in every bibliography of recommended reading for children from grades four to eight. Both of these books reflect an authenticity and humanness which are very rare today. They provide a refreshing change from the more popular and non-human sphere of Star Wars and Pac Man. At the same time, they help to counteract the insidious, old stereotypes perpetuated by *The Five Chinese Brothers* and countless other racist 'classics' fed to generations of Canadian children. ▢



From West Coast Chinese Boy

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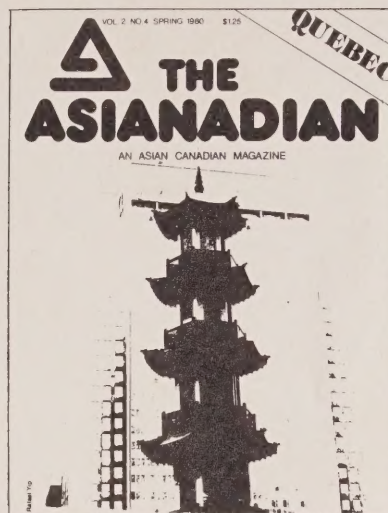
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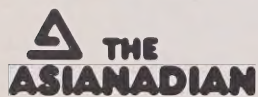
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